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PRESENT STATUS OF THE ELECTIVE SYSTEM IN AMERICAN COLLEGES

From ten to twenty years ago the elective system was the theme of abundant, and not rarely of sharp discussion. But the plan has been adopted into the common thought and has quietly extended its range in our higher schools. That can hardly be called a reputable college which has not admitted it in some measure. Movements toward liberty, unless radical, pass unchallenged, and arouse no comment outside of the school concerned. In some cases the system has been adopted sparingly and timidly, as if under the stress of competition. More often it has been received heartily up to a certain limit. In some conspicuous instances the plan prevails throughout the undergraduate course, but with inevitable checks which are too little understood by critics.

The noteworthy fact to-day is the immense diversity, amounting almost to chaos, seen in the application of the elective system by American colleges. By college is here meant the undergraduate school, whether the institution is university or college. This diversity does not mean that the plan is not good, but rather that it is alive. It is not easy to classify a group of organisms which is undergoing rapid and various modification. In these days the naturalist's difficulties are encountered by every student of education.

College studies may be divided into three classes: required, restricted, and free. The educational faith of a school appears somewhat in its proportioning of these three. But the diversity goes much deeper, as a short analysis will show. If a certain percentage of studies is to be required, then what studies? No two schools give the same answer.

	Latin.	Greek.	French.	German.	Logic.	Psychology.	Natural Theology.	Evidences.	Philosophy.	History.	Economics.	Sociology.	Government.	Law.	Bible.	Pedagogy.	Fine Art.	Rhetoric.	English Literature.	English Language.	Mathematics.	Chemistry.	Physics.	Astronomy.	Geology.	Mineralogy.	Biology.	Physiology.	
Amherst.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Bowdoin.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Brown.	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
California.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	5	
Columbia.	-	-	-	++	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	9	
Colgate.	-	-	-	++	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	12	
Chicago.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	±	±	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	8	
Colorado.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	8	
Cornell.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	
Hamilton.	-	-	-	-	-	++	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	18	
Harvard.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	
Michigan.	±	±	±	±	±	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	6	
New York University.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	8	
Northwestern.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	6	
Oberlin.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	8	
Pennsylvania.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	11	
Rochester.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	16	
Rutgers.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	24	
Syracuse.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	
Trinity.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	10	
Union.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	17	
Vermont.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	6	
Wesleyan.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	11	
Williams.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	pl 18	
Yale.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	12	
	23	22	10	9	15	12	10	1	2	6	11	8	2	2	1	4	1	1	22	11	2	23	9	10	1	4	1	4	14

EXPLANATION OF TABLE

The table has been prepared with care, on the basis of the catalogues of 1895-96, or those of the current year so far as they have come to hand. The variety in plan and in designation of the same subject renders it difficult to secure accuracy, but it is hoped that no serious error occurs. In the case of Michigan, 6 appears as the total because logic and psychology are alternative requirements. In several cases French and German are alternate prescriptions, but this does not appear in the scheme. Subjects taught incidentally with other required subjects do not have place, as Bible study at Bowdoin. The term philosophy is used in a somewhat variable sense. Biology is made to include zoölogy and botany. Physiology includes military drill and all other forms of physical training. Rhetoric includes public speaking. The sign + always means requirement in the Junior or Senior year, but not exclusively, since, in some cases, the requirement reaches downward. The sign - denotes requirement in the lower years only. ± indicates that studies may be taken either above or below the middle of the course, though they fall usually below.

Many wise and many unwise things are said and written about educational values. These values depend less upon the subject than upon the goodness of the teaching and the nature of the student. It is but natural that teachers should regard their own subjects as essential to culture. The traditions and environment of colleges, rather than broad and defensible principles, determine what subjects shall be required.

The reader is invited to study the tabular view of subjects required for the degree of Bachelor of Arts, in a group of 25 higher schools which all will concede as representative. It will be seen that 6 subjects are each thought essential by 1 college. These are: Law, natural theology, fine arts, pedagogy, astronomy, and mineralogy. Sociology, Bible study, government, English language, geology, and biology are required in 2 to 4 curricula each. Economics has 8 votes, but the subject probably does not languish in the other 17 schools. Ethics, psychology, and logic still stand before all candidates for the degree of Bachelor of Arts, in 10, 12, and 15 colleges respectively. Fifteen colleges do not seem to think the ethical theories of the lecture room are especially promotive of good conduct, and 10 appear to recognize that correct thinking may be secured without formal logic. In this view the writer concurs, believing that the fullest liberty should prevail in the higher years of the undergraduate course. The number of colleges requiring a given subject varies between 1 and 23. Twenty-three yet require mathematics and Latin for the degree here in question. The exceptions are Harvard and Cornell. Williams requires the mathematics and the Latin, but not the Greek. If we observe the number of subjects required by any college, we find, out of 29 subjects, a range of 1 (Harvard and Cornell) to 24 (Rutgers). The disagreement of the doctors is well-nigh complete.

We must again emphasize the diversity of policy, if we examine the restricted studies. Here we have reference to the so-called group electives. The selection may be so narrowed that what is granted in the name of freedom by one

hand is suspiciously withdrawn by the other. Or the groups may be so general as to have small controlling value. Or again, the groups may be of such a nature as to compel excessive specialism. In fact, some schools have seized upon the group system as a means of securing breadth and symmetry, while others use it to promote specialism and continuity. Symmetry as regards the whole range of study, and continuity in some departments, appear as reasonable and prime ends in curriculum-making. The system of required studies can provide for a kind of symmetry, but if all claims are regarded, the resulting compromise will destroy continuity. It is doubtful whether any group system yet devised secures both ends. The groups are artificial; either failing to restrict, or restricting too much, and often failing of individual adaptation. If, as in some conspicuous cases, the groups are narrow and extend over two or three years, how shall the student elect wisely at so early a stage in his course? It becomes an election of curricula, and the objections to the elective system, as unsuited to immaturity, apply here with double force.

After all, it is a fair question, whether the two great ends, symmetry and continuity, may not best be trusted, at a certain stage of maturity, to the student's choice. How and when freedom shall be conferred, is the question. Most colleges think Juniors and Seniors can be—more or less—trusted. Many of the strong and conservative faculties are introducing a large measure of choice into the Sophomore year. Harvard has had twelve years of experience with Freshman electives, and Cornell has now followed her example. And it can have escaped no observant eye that a rational introduction of freedom into the high school is rapidly taking place. The growing appreciation of the practical and educational value of a large group of newer subjects renders it impossible longer to maintain a hard-and-fast course of study in the secondary schools. Thus the elective system is gaining ground, and it will be the aim of the later part of this paper to show that the student can be trusted with all the freedom that he is likely to receive.

We have intimated that the schemes of the several colleges are difficult of classification. This will appear more fully, if a rough attempt be made. We may take first a group of 8 colleges in which the studies are substantially prescribed to the end of the Sophomore year, and are afterward more or less free. Here fall Columbia, Yale, Williams, Hamilton, Colgate, Rochester, Rutgers, and Union. But among these there is variety. Columbia, Hamilton, and Colgate admit the elective principle slightly in the Sophomore year. At Williams the electives are somewhat controlled by the group plan. At Rutgers 2 out of 9 very restricted groups must be pursued throughout the two upper years. The choice once made is irrevocable and compels a considerable degree of specialism. At Columbia first-year courses in the schools of law, mines, and medicine may be taken as Senior electives for the degree of Bachelor of Arts. In 6 colleges of the group the electives are free, but vary much in amount. Thus, Columbia has, in the upper years, 12 term hours required, 78 elective; Yale has 15 hours required, 75 elective; Colgate, 15 hours required, 82 elective; Hamilton, 40 hours required, 63 elective; Rochester, 45 hours required, 45 elective; Union, 50 hours required, 47 elective; and Williams, 39 hours required, 57 elective.

A second group consists of schools which admit the elective plan to a marked degree in the Sophomore year, and wholly or extensively in the upper years. Here we place Amherst, Bowdoin, Brown, Oberlin, Syracuse, Trinity, Vermont, and Wesleyan. But here also strong differences appear. At Bowdoin two-thirds of the Sophomore work is elective from a group whose sum is 28 hours per term. All the Junior and Senior work is elective from a group aggregating 36 hours per term. A similar plan prevails at Wesleyan for the Sophomore year, with a small amount of required work in the upper years. Sophomore electives are also somewhat restricted at Amherst, Vermont, and Trinity. At Syracuse a major and a minor, making 9 hours, run through the upper years, leaving 6 hours of free electives. Some of the ratios of required to elective upper-year work

in the group are: Amherst, 15 hours required, 76 elective; Brown, 18 required, 72 elective; Trinity, 18 required, 72 elective.

Our list includes two pronounced representatives of the group system, New York University and the University of Pennsylvania. In the latter the studies of the upper years are mainly divided into 13 groups of 2 studies each. Each group is narrow in range, consisting of 2 languages, 2 sciences, mathematics and a science, philosophy and history, economics and history, etc. Each student must pursue one of these groups for 8 hours during the Junior and 10 hours during the Senior year, leaving the balance either required, or free electives. Here we have a large measure of continuity and some range, though it may be questioned whether 2 hours in the Junior, and 5 hours in the Senior year, are sufficient to secure the symmetry and individuality that are desirable. In New York University the group system goes farther. At the beginning of the Sophomore year, one of 10 parallel groups must be chosen. Of these groups, different members lead to the several bachelors' degrees. In each group the subjects which give name to the group run for three years. In the Senior year nearly two-thirds of the work is freely elective. The plan, as a whole, however, amounts nearly to an election of curricula.

California can hardly be classed with any of the others. One-half the work is said to be prescribed, though the plan is modern and flexible. One-fourth of the total is in group electives, and the remaining fourth is free. The plans of Northwestern and Michigan are similarly flexible, though the prescribed work is less in volume and the rest is without restriction. In a general way, Chicago may be classed here. Greek, Latin, English, mathematics, physical training, history, and philosophy are required for the degree in question, and a limited amount of work must be done in the last two subjects, whatever the prospective degree. In the Senior colleges (Junior and Senior years of other colleges) the student may take to the extent of half his work in one department, and may not spread it over more than 4 in any 3 con-

secutive quarters. One-third of his work for a bachelor's degree must come within a certain group of departments, whose range, however, is wide. We come now to a final group, in which the largest liberty prevails—Harvard, Cornell, and, we may well add, Leland Stanford. At Cornell, military drill is the sole requirement. At Harvard rhetoric and English composition are required of all Freshmen. French or German is also prescribed, unless the student has offered both in preparation. All other work is elective. That there are checks upon liberty, however, is here instructively seen. The Harvard Freshman must elect out of a group of 18 subjects, of which 6 are languages and 8 are mathematics or elementary science. Only 2 courses can be taken in 1 department without special permission, and the choice of studies must be submitted to the adviser. Beyond the Freshman year, certain courses can be chosen only with the consent of the instructor, and in all cases, sequence of courses in a given department, fitness to pursue a course, and conflict of hours between courses, must be regarded. It thus becomes evident that the student cannot do anything he pleases, even in a university whose name is a synonym of liberty.

All freedom involves risk. The elective system is no exception. Suspicion of the abuse of liberty not seldom finds official expression in the college catalogue. Thus, from Bowdoin: "The elective studies are so grouped that, while a reasonable degree of concentration is encouraged, excessive and premature specialism is prevented." And this from Vermont: "The abuse to which a system of perfectly free electives is liable is avoided by the requirement of a certain number of studies which are intended to secure some completeness and symmetry of discipline, while the number of electives permitted gives room for the development of special talents and the following out of individual predilections." Once more we may quote, this time from Pennsylvania: "The courses have been planned with the view of retaining as required studies those subjects which seem essential for all who are candidates for a liberal degree, and, on

the other hand, of allowing the utmost freedom of selection consistent with the attainment of a sound education." Thus it is sought to offset the evils of election by requirement and grouping. But, as we have seen, no two colleges agree as to what studies are "essential for all who are candidates for a liberal degree," and it will not help matters to charge the freer systems with commercialism, as Cornell was charged in a recent educational meeting in the Empire State, and this because she had opened a wider but not shorter highway to the degree of Bachelor of Arts. The writer believes that the risks of the elective plan are overestimated. This is not the place to argue its advantages. Little could be added to the things already well said by many. No candid observer of college life can deny that free choice has promoted vital scholarship and hastened the growth of manly judgment in college students. It has revolutionized college teaching by sealing the doom of the lazy instructor. It has steadily extended its conquests, and is pushing its way into more colleges and over wider areas of the college course. That it should stand without important checks few would contend, but that the college student does not often abuse the elective privilege is, in the belief of the writer, capable of proof. Toward such proof is here offered the result of an inductive study of the choice of 82 members of the last 4 graduating classes in Colgate University. These records were chosen because accessible to the writer. The names were taken as they come, and the choices relate to the upper years. For the purpose of the study, the subjects were divided into three groups; first, languages; second, literature, history, philosophy, art, and pedagogy; third, mathematics and the sciences of nature. The year is divided into three terms, with election at the beginning of each. This plan is unfavorable to continuity, and hence offers a more rigid test of the "evils of desultoriness," if such evils exist. On the other hand, it should be said that, for every man, there are doubtless some subjects about which he desires to learn something, but for which he could scarcely afford the time for a year course. The total term

hours for the 82 men in two years was 7954. The total required term hours (greater than in future, as appears in table) was 2319. We have left to free election 5635. Did the choices fail in continuity? The total term hours taken in three-, four-, five-, and six-term courses, was 2847. The total in two-term courses was 1080. Deducting, we find 1708 term hours taken in single-term courses. We now take into account that certain subjects are offered for but one term, and also the fact that changes and reorganizations of departments have been very numerous during the past five years, thus affording sources of irregularity beyond the control of the student. The Junior and Senior in Colgate University cannot, therefore, be accused of desultoriness, or of falling upon a search for "snap" courses. Any-one who knows the care with which most of the men make up their programmes would scarcely need the assurance here given. So much for continuity. The other desideratum is symmetry. The college student should specialize but moderately.

The number of language courses taken by the 82 men was 258. The number of courses in the second group (history, philosophy, etc.) was 982. The number of courses in the scientific group was 573. The average was 3, 12, and 7 per man respectively. It should be remembered that most of the language work is done in the lower years. Only 11 elected no languages, and 25 took year courses in some one language. Only 2 elected less than a full year of science, and of these 1 took a term of physics and the other a term each of botany and zoölogy. All had physics and chemistry as required studies in the early years. A large number divided the Junior year somewhat evenly between the sciences and the humanities, then dropped the sciences, and elected heavily in the second group in the Senior year. Could curriculum-makers do better for most students of a small college than this? Only 6 were deficient in the middle group. Of these 1 leaned toward languages, and 5 toward science. Three of the 5 secured positions in practical work or as teachers, impossible to them but for a degree of

specialization. In two cases of able men, post-graduate work was probably out of the question, without an interval for the acquirement of means. It must not be forgotten, in the cry against specialism, that beginnings in the narrow paths of specialism often lead the best men out into the broad fields of culture. Some of the weaker men of the classes whose records were studied made remarkably good programmes. Many schemes could have been improved, but, as a whole, the study indicates the sobriety, earnestness, and intelligence of the college man, and goes far to establish the broad claim of President Jordan that "the average student finds a better course of study for his own development and his own purposes, than any consensus of educational philosophers can possibly make out before becoming acquainted with him."

In 1885 Professor George T. Ladd, writing in explanation of changes toward freedom at Yale, said, "The students have responded with unexpected wisdom and manliness to the new trust which has been placed in them." A couple of years later, from a university differing much in its policy from Yale, Professor George H. Palmer made an utterance that deserves a new hearing by friend and foe of modern educational freedom. "Election invigorates the springs of action. Formerly I did not see this, and I favored prescribed systems, thinking them systems of duty. That absence of an aggressive intellectual life which prescribed studies induced, I, like many others, mistook for faithfulness. I no longer have any question that, for the average man, sound habits of steady endeavor grow best in fields of choice. Emerson's words are words of soberness,

" He that worketh high and wise,
Nor pauses in his plan,
Will take the sun out of the skies,
Ere freedom out of man."

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